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ABSTRACT

In this conceptual analysis, the term study skill was used to denote a field of inquiry or a group of phenomena. The basis for the meaning given to the term was the understanding of the common meaning of skill modified by the word study. The term skill refers to the activity by which a task is performed. Further it refers to the quality of that activity. Study skill denotes the whole activity in relation to a study task considered from the point of view of its quality. The problem of research then is to describe study activities as to their qualities in relation to the outcome of learning. The suggested meaning solves the problem of inconsistency of the questioned meaning of the term and may also have an integrative function. As interpreted here study skills actually denote the field of inquiry that has been the main concern within educational research but as conceived within an explorative-descriptive frame-work.
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Conference on Improving University Teaching.
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ABSTRACT

The term study skill is commonly used in its plural form to refer to study habits, study methods and study techniques assumed to be related to academic success. Within the tradition of prediction of academic success the skills have been seen as one more predictor of success. Within the field of teaching and training they have been seen as something that might be trained to improve study activities and academic success. However, the relation between the study skills referred to and academic success is problematic. There is an inconsistency as to the meaning given to the term. The inconsistency involves unclarity of reference as well as a category mistake in thinking; taking a relation that holds between the whole study activity and academic success (the outcome) to hold for parts or aspects of the activity.

The conceptual analysis presented in this report has its background in earlier empirical work carried out by the author. In this work the term study skill was used to denote a field of inquiry or a group of phenomena. The basis for the meaning given to the term was the understanding of the common meaning of *skill* modified by the word study. The term skill refers to the activity by which a task is performed. Further it refers to the quality of that activity. *Study skill* denotes the whole activity in relation to a study task considered from the point of view of its quality. The problem of research then is to describe study activities as to their qualities in relation to the outcome of learning.

The suggested meaning solves the problem of inconsistency of the questioned meaning of the term and may also have an integrative function. As interpreted here *study skills* actually denote the field of inquiry that has been the main concern within educational research but as conceived within an explorative-descriptive framework.

THE CONCEPT OF STUDY SKILL(S)

The conceptual analysis presented in the following has its background in earlier empirical work carried out by the present author (Svensson, 1976 and 1977). In this work the term study skill was used to denote a field of inquiry or a group of phenomena. The basis for the meaning given to the term was the understanding of the common meaning of *skill* modified by the word study. The use of the term was based on the conception that the meaning corresponded to natural educational units or phenomena, of great interest. The use of the term was not based on earlier use of the term in any more specific context. The original term used in the empirical work was a Swedish term which is one word, naturally used in its singular form (*studiefärdighet*). The Swedish term is less ambiguous than the English term study skill(s).

The term study skills has earlier been used in connection with guides and courses concerned with how to study. The meaning given to the term within this field of practice is quite different from the meaning used by the present author. This is not only a question of different use of a term but reveals fundamental conceptual differences as well as inconsistencies within the field. In the following an attempt to clarify the role and meaning of *study skill(s)* will be presented. The plural form study skills will be used in referring to the conception within the field of guidance and training. *Study skills* refers to study habits, study methods and study techniques assumed to be related to study success. The singular form study skill will be used in referring to the meaning used by the present author. *Study skill* refers to the quality of the whole unit of a study performance. The form study skill(s) will be used when both conceptions are referred to at the same time.

In a technical sense the choice of terms is totally arbitrary. Terms are just signs that one may relate to what concept or phenomenon one pleases. However, terms used in research are not merely terms in this technical sense but words in some language, i.e. they are endowed with meaning. For this reason the choice and use of terms is not arbitrary. The same terms are given varying meanings within research. The variation reflects different conceptions of the phenomena referred to. Also, as the conceptions of the phenomena develop, which is the very aim of research, so the meaning of the terms change. Considering this character

of the use of terms in relation to the case of *study skill(s)* there seems to be a need for discussing the meaning of this term. First educational practice will be considered as the context for the use of the term. Then research will be considered as a context for suggesting a meaning of the term.

STUDY SKILLS IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

In dealing with learning and teaching, problems are encountered. The main character of a problem is that there is a deficiency or something which is not achieved. In the present case, problems arise when study success is not achieved in accordance with aims and expectations. The problems in education have been dealt with mainly in two ways, by changes in teaching and by differentiation between and groupings of individuals. These two ways of approaching the problems have led to the development of different, although interrelated, fields of practices. The concern for the efficiency of teaching has led to extensive work on curricula, learning materials and prescriptions of teaching. The concern for individual differences has taken the form of the test movement in education. Tests have been used for selection and grouping of individuals and also for decisions and guidance in special cases of individual problems.

Another quite different field of practices has also developed as an answer to educational problems especially within higher education. The field referred to is the one of guides and courses concerning how to study. As within the test movement the emphasis is on the individual, but not on stable individual characteristics but on changeable aspects of the study activity. There seems to be a shared conception between the two fields of practices of a difference between stable individual characteristics and changeable characteristics of the individuals activity. The difference is mainly one of interest and emphasis. It is within the field of concern for changeable characteristics of study activities that the term study skills has been used.

Study skills is synonymous to good study habits, study methods and study techniques. It is in accordance with this meaning of the term and the expressed conception of the phenomena always to use the plural form. Thus *study skills* is referring to a set of skills (habits, methods and techniques). In thinking about how to help students to carry through

their studies it is perhaps natural first to think of the most apparent observable aspects of their study activities, such as; if and how much they study, when and where they study and how they study in terms of observable treatment of study materials. Lately there has also been a concern for students' awareness of their study situation and their own way of studying. Such an awareness can be argued to have a value in its own right. However, it is also considered as an important aspect of the study activities and as a condition for change of these activities. The emphasis on awareness is very different from the one on study skills. However, the claim of a relation to study success is similar, as is the need of justification of the claim. Within the field one has to some extent tried to evaluate courses in how to study and how to prepare for studies by descriptions of the participants' subsequent success in studying. Generally it can be said that the empirical basis for claiming that the content in guides and courses corresponds to what is important in or for studying is very weak.

The conception, mentioned above, of study success as depending on both stable individual characteristics and changeable characteristics of the students activity makes it not quite clear what the relation between study skills and success is expected to be. The concern for study skills has mainly been one of a practical kind. One has wanted to do something and one has done what seemed to be appropriate. In using the term one has not actually been concerned with the understanding of the phenomena. Practical concerns are most often of this kind. At the same time the very meaning of and the interest in study skills is based on an assumed relation to study success. Hopefully research could help to clarify the issue and to improve the basis for this field of practice.

STUDY SKILL(S) CONSIDERED IN RELATION TO RESEARCH

Educational research has the development of practices within institutionalised education as its background. The practical problems and questions have also been the starting point for the research. Thus research first developed mainly within two fields; those of teaching methods and individual differences. The changes in teaching methods and the use of tests in practice have had the aim to solve practical problems and to improve the outcome of the educational system. The concerns in research have been for prediction and explanation of the outcome of the educational systems.

As described above the field of guidance and training in how to study, has been complementary or alternative to the two dominating fields of practice and research. To the extent that there has been any reference to research within this field of practice it has mainly been to general principles of motivation and learning, which have mostly been based on descriptions of learning in contexts quite different from ordinary studies. Lately there has been an increase of research into student learning and study activities within the field of higher education. This makes the questions raised here of a special relevance for the understanding of the character of this research and its relation to practice. The two main fields of educational research, teaching methods and individual differences, has been based on a common conceptual frame-work. It may seem natural to try to give *study skills* its meaning within this frame-work. This is what is usually done more or less explicitly. However, the term seems not to get a proper meaning within this frame-work, but seems rather to belong to a complementary or alternative conceptual frame-work. The meaning of *study skill(s)* will be discussed in relation to the two frame-works referred to, starting with the traditional one.

The predictive-explanatory frame-work of purified concepts in
standardised situations

It is two characteristics of the main part of earlier educational research that are very important. The first is its predictive-explanatory character. The second characteristic is related to the first one and concerns how the predictions-explanations are arrived at. This is made by separate or additive applications of defined predictors-explanatory concepts. The concern has been with the predictors-explanatory concepts and with the purification of these through definitions and the use of standardised situations. Within this frame-work concepts are explanatory in parallel to being predictors. Different predictors are seen as having the potential of adding to the prediction of educational phenomena and similarly the concepts are considered to contribute in an additive way to the explanation of the predicted phenomena. Within this frame-work the research on teaching methods and individual differences has developed more and more predictors-explanatory concepts.

The aiming at purification is crucial. It represents the approach to the problem of finding common and stable characteristics of individuals and situations behind an apparent variation. The approach is to try to isolate in its general common form what is thought to be common to or behind many phenomena. The isolation is from different, more accidental characteristics that vary between the phenomena and from other more general characteristics which also enter into the complex of a phenomenon. This approach is quite explicit within the test movement where the research is devoted to developing tests, i.e. controlled standardised situations to define individual characteristics. Also, in research on teaching methods the aim, from a theoretical point of view, has been to define and constitute methods which represent principles that could be common to many cases of teaching. The aim has been to arrive at principles, thought to be fundamental, through control and standardisation. The purification of the principles in some cases has been stressed to the extent of excluding the teacher in favour of some kind of equipment.

Starting from a concern with very general aspects of teaching methods there has been a continuing differentiation and specification in the descriptions of teaching methods and teacher activities. Starting from the concept of general intelligence, more and more specific kinds of abilities have been defined. The concern for personality traits and for cognitive styles and strategies has meant a further broadening of this research. An increasing interest in research on development of intelligence and personality as representing fundamental knowledge, in relation to educational problems, has contributed to breaking down the boundaries between the two dominating fields. There has been an increasing concern for the relations between teaching methods and individual differences, for the relations between different kinds of individual characteristics and for the stability and change of *stable* individual characteristics. There has also been an increasing concern for describing the meaning of the predictors-explanatory concepts in terms of the processes involved in the standardised situations used. This development has still been very much within the predictive-explanatory framework.

Placed within this frame-work, the relation between study skills and success claimed within the field of guidance and training, may seem to add one more group of possible predictors-explanatory concepts. If individual characteristics are considered to be very stable and predicting-explaining the major part of the differences in study achievements, then study skills have to be just complementary within an additive model. Thus the meaning of study skills would be good study habits, methods and techniques which both are changeable and contribute to success, although to a limited extent.

The concern for purified concepts has been one for stability and generality, i.e. for the fundamental character of that which is purified in a lot of less pure manifestations. The concepts are not intended to be restricted to the groups of phenomena represented by the standardised situations, but to be clarified as to their meanings in these situations. The predictive values of the standardised situations are seen as justifications for assessing the relevance of the purified meanings to less pure situations. To arrive at stability and generality through purification is the very idea of the frame-work. The most efficient predictor in one separate case, would rather be a very similar situation to the predicted one, but this would not meet the aim of generality. In relation to ordinary educational phenomena the use of the explanatory concepts refer to an abstract level that has its clarification as to concrete meaning within the context of standardised situations.

Study skills are not considered to be stable and fundamental. Neither is the concept given a purified meaning by reference to standardised situations. The concept is not a predictive-explanatory concept as defined within the frame-work. Although the concept has not been developed in research, one may think it could be given a meaning within the frame-work. The character of study skills of being rather easily changeable however, disqualifies the concept. A claim that changeable study skills are predictive of study success seems to belong to a different frame-work. The confusion stems from the focussing in indications of the learning outcome attained in standardised situations. The possible predictive-explanatory relation of study skills to these measures of outcome is quite different from that assumed to exist for the standardised predictors and the purified concepts.

The difficulty in clarifying the situation stems from the concern for the measured outcome as that which is predicted. The outcome of course is best predicted and explained by reference to the activities leading to the outcome. *Study skills* is referring to a part of this more immediate context for explaining the learning outcome. However, this is not the concern within the given frame-work. The predictors-explanatory concepts are intended to predict and explain the whole complex of study activities and learning outcome. The focussing on predictions of measures of outcome by use of standardised situations seems to imply a neglect of the most immediate explanations of the outcome. From a theoretical point of view this is problematic since it means a lack of clarity as to what is to be explained or what has been explained. To clarify the relation between predictors-explanatory concepts and the predicted and explained phenomena there is a need for delimitations and descriptions of the phenomena. Such descriptions, however, have not been in accordance with the frame-work. It seems probable that *study skill(s)* can be given a fruitful and consistent meaning within a descriptive frame-work.

The explorative-descriptive frame-work of delimited concepts
in natural situations

That the frame-work referred to is explorative-descriptive means that the main concern is for descriptions and that these are based on exploration of phenomena. The starting point is in the phenomena to be described and not in any defined categories of description derived from theoretical concepts. Categories of description are arrived at through exploration and are considered to be main results of the research. The categories are the basis for testing the applicability of previously defined theoretical concepts, for modifying old concepts and for developing new ones. Predictions and explanations may be a part of the descriptions and may also be based on the descriptions.

There has been an increasing concern for descriptions of teaching and learning activities, of interaction and communication and of students' and teachers' conceptions within educational research. The aim is to clarify the nature of the educational phenomena, both of the activities involved and of the outcome. An increasing part of this research is explorative in character. The relation between activity and outcome is

of course a fundamental one which different descriptions may relate to in different ways. In explorative-descriptive studies focussing on the activity-outcome relation both the activities and the outcome are approached in an explorative way. The main interest is not to predict and explain any given measures of outcome but to clarify what the outcome is including the meaning of given measures of outcome.

Since *study skills* refers to the relation between activity and outcome the descriptive frame-work seems to be the appropriate one, but the meaning of the term does not fit the frame-work. There is still an inconsistency as to the meaning of the term. The problem concerns the combining of *study* and *skills*.

The plural form of study skills refers to a set of habits, methods and/or techniques. The use of the word skills in characterising these would normally mean that each of the habits, methods and techniques represents a skilled performance of some task. The kind of task is indicated by the word study. Thus each of the habits, methods and techniques referred to should represent an instance of a skilled performance of a study task. This is not the case and it is not the meaning given to the term. The meaning is rather that the skills are subskills of skilled performance of a study task. The use of *study skills* to refer to such subskills is a category mistake, attributing characteristics of the whole to the parts.

It might seem as if the category mistake is merely one in the form of a misuse of words. Even so it is important because it can easily lead to a neglect of the phenomena referred to by a consistent use of the words and this seems to be the case here. However, it is not just a misuse of words but a mistake in thinking as well. The mistake consists in assuming that the subskills referred to are of such a kind that they could in themselves be related to study success. It is a mistake to conceive a relation that holds between the whole of the study activity and the outcome as also applicable to any part of the activity. The relation for the part has to be indirect through the relation to the whole. Then one could think that the subskills called study skills were still subskills of skilled study performance (study skill proper) and represented important parts of the performance. Then the mistake, although a category mistake, would not seem that important.

One possibility is that the subskills represent necessary skills in achieving success and so are related to success in the context of the whole performance. But it is not necessary to carry through independent studies at certain times and places or to make notes, underlinings, abstracts of summaries and so on in some generally defined *good* ways. The skills are not necessary and they might as well be bad as good for the whole performance, depending on other characteristics of the performance and on the task. The fact is that what we have been talking about as subskills are not subskills at all but rather aspects of the performance or aspects of parts of the performance and to consider them as subskills is perhaps the most fundamental mistake. The aspects of study activity referred to in terms of study skills do not exist at all as units but represent more observable aspects of dealing with study tasks and subtasks. They get their meaning through their relation to the cognitive activity which is fundamental in dealing with the study task and which gives the relation to the outcome.

The term study skills should not be used in the inconsistent manner described above. Consistency will be attained if the term study skill is used to refer to the unity of a study performance. The plural form then refers to several such units, i.e. to different ways of carrying through the *same* study task and/or to the carrying through of different study tasks. This consistent meaning of study skill fits very well into the explorative-descriptive framework. Study skills then represent rather extensive units of human activities. In research the function of concepts to delimit areas of inquiry is very important. This is apparently so within an explorative-descriptive framework. The concept of study skill gives such a delimitation of phenomena as a basis for descriptions.

THE MEANING OF STUDY SKILL

The term skill refers to some activity by which a task is performed. Further it refers to the quality of the activity of performing the task. In using the word, it is almost always combined with some other word to denote what kind of task is considered and thereby what skill is referred to. As used the word thus denotes a relation, that between an activity of an individual (or group) and a task. The meaning of study skill then concerns the quality of the relation between an indi-

viduals's activity and a study task. It of course concerns most, the most important characteristics and qualities of the relation.

Tasks are in most cases socially constructed units, study tasks within formal education are very much so. Delimitations and definitions of the tasks are usually made in terms of organisation of activities in the form of grouping of learning materials and teaching in relation to requirements. *Study tasks* denotes the set of such units or tasks that have been or could be constructed. *Study skills* then denotes the field of activities in relation to these tasks considered from the point of view of their quality. The special kind of criteria of success, in the form of results on standardised tests and in exams usually used in formal education are not fundamental to the concept of study skill. However, they are fundamental to these cases where they are used why they must be considered as a part of describing the study skills. Within an explorative-descriptive frame-work the interests in the qualities of the relation between study activities and study tasks is not restricted to the kind of criteria normally used within the educational system.

Within the explorative-descriptive frame-work there is no division of concerns into focussing on individual characteristics or teaching methods. The phenomena are considered to be relational and study skill denotes the whole relation between the study activity and the study task in a given instance. The descriptions arrived at constitute a basis for a joint consideration of the construction of the task (work on curricula, teaching methods, and learning material) and the study activities (selection, guidance and training). As interpreted here *study skills* actually denote the field of inquiry that has been the main concern within educational research as conceived within an explorative-descriptive frame-work. This frame-work hopefully should be more fruitful for development of knowledge within the field than the use of purified concepts and standardised situations has been.

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